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FSIS FACTS

Inspection of Meat and Poultry Imports



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Is that imported ham or liver pate safe to eat? How can you be sure your "New Zealand spring lamb" is really spring lamb from New Zealand? The fact is, imported meat and poultry products are prepared under the same strict inspection requirements as meat and poultry produced in the United States.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for ensuring that imported meat and poultry products, like domestic products, are wholesome, unadulterated, and accurately labeled. The Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act require countries that export meat and poultry to the United States to impose inspection requirements "at least equal to" U.S. requirements.

Facts about Meat and Poultry Imports

Each year, the United States imports about 2.5 billion pounds of meat, which represents approximately 6 percent of our total meat supply. About 80 percent of the imports are fresh meat (mostly boneless), and about 19 percent are processed products such as ham, sausages, or canned beef. More than 80 percent of meat imports come from four countries: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Denmark.

Imported poultry products account for far less than 1 percent of our poultry supply—usually less than 8 million pounds. The products are mainly processed items such as pate and other canned and specialty products. They are imported from Canada, Israel, Hong Kong, Great Britain, and France.

Ensuring Safe Imports — Two Ways

Imported meat and poultry products are inspected in the country of origin as domestic products are inspected in U.S. slaughter and processing plants. Federal meat and poultry inspection laws require countries exporting meat and poultry to the United States to impose inspection requirements at least equal to U.S. requirements. FSIS reviews foreign inspection systems to ensure that they are equal to the U.S. system.

FSIS also reinspects imported meat and poultry products on a sample basis as they enter the United States. Data derived from import reinspection constitute a check on the effectiveness of foreign inspection systems.

Monitoring the Effectiveness of Foreign Inspection Systems

Before a foreign country can export meat or poultry to the United States, it must be granted eligibility to do so. Currently, 43 countries are eligible to export to the United States, but only 33 are active exporters.

As the first step in determining eligibility, FSIS evaluates the country's entire inspection system. FSIS reviews the country's laws, regulations, directives, and other written materials that govern its inspection program; reviews administration; and conducts an on-site review of the country's inspection operations.

A multidisciplinary team typically composed of a veterinarian, chemist, food technologist, microbiologist, statistician, and compliance officer conducts the review.

The initial review team looks for evidence to verify that the foreign country is imposing requirements equivalent to those enforced in the U.S. inspection program. These include strong national government control over inspection, as well as over plant construction, facilities, and equipment; continuous inspection of slaughter and processing operations; a single standard of inspection and sanitation in exporting plants; official controls over condemned product; and a certified residue control program.

After a country is granted eligibility to export its products to the United States, FSIS relies on the exporting country to certify plants and carry out daily inspection. Individual plants must apply to the country's national inspection authorities for certification to export to the United States. In turn, the chief inspection official in the country certifies to FSIS those plants that meet all applicable standards and are authorized to export to the United States.

From two to four times a year, FSIS reviews the eligible country's inspection system to ensure that its procedures and standards continue to meet U.S. requirements. Reviewers, who are veterinarians and food technologists with considerable experience in the United States inspection system, visit certified plants and other sites. The frequency of reviews is determined by a country's performance history—as demonstrated in previous plant reviews and product reinspections at the port of entry.

Port-of-Entry Reinspection

As a final check on the effectiveness of the foreign country's inspection system, FSIS reinspects meat and poultry products on a sample basis as they enter the United States.

About 90 FSIS import inspectors and supervisors carry out reinspection at more than 200 official import establishments. Reinspection is directed by a computerized system called the Automated Import Information System (AIIS), which stores reinspection results from all ports of entry.

All imported products are checked for transportation damage, labeling, general condition, and proper certification.

Information about each shipment is entered into the AIIS, which selects lots for various types of additional reinspections.

Additional inspection tasks that may be scheduled include: product examination; accuracy of net weight; condition of the container; laboratory analyses for food chemistry (such as fat, water and nitrite levels) and drug and chemical residues; species testing; and monitoring of product labels. The actual inspection tasks and the scope of inspection are based on the nature of the product and on the performance history of the plant and country.

Meat and poultry products that pass reinspection are stamped "U.S. Inspected and Passed" and allowed to enter U.S. commerce. Products that do not pass reinspection are stamped "U.S. Refused Entry" and must be exported, destroyed, or in some cases converted to animal food. When condemnation occurs, inspection is intensified for future shipments of the product from the same plant, and in some cases, for all shipments from the same country.

Typically, less than one-half of 1 percent of all imported meat and poultry products are rejected by FSIS at ports of entry.

Labeling of Imported Meat and Poultry

When meat and poultry are imported, the name of the country of origin must appear on the label. However, only imported products that reach consumers without further processing retain such labeling. For example, a can of ham or corned beef that goes directly to a retail outlet will name the country of origin on the label.

However, if imported boneless beef is combined with U.S. beef and other ingredients in a U.S. plant to produce a can of beef stew, the label is not required to indicate the presence of imported beef.

Residue Control

Residue control is one of the major features of an exporting country's inspection system that must be judged equal to the U.S. system. The U.S. inspection laws have been amended twice in recent years—in the 1981 and 1985 farm bills—to strengthen residue controls applied to imported meat and poultry.

A foreign country exporting to the United States must enforce the same residue sampling and testing controls as the United States. This includes random sampling of animals at slaughter, use of FSIS-approved testing methods, tests for compounds in the tissues or organs in which those particular residues would concentrate, and tests for compounds identified as possible contaminants of meat exported to the United States.

Each year, countries must be certified by FSIS as continuing to operate an equivalent residue control program. FSIS experts make sure that the country's residue program uses approved analytical methods, that officials are knowledgeable about the use of chemical compounds in their country, and that the country tests for those compounds which could potentially contaminate the food supply. A country that fails to receive an annual residue certification from FSIS cannot ship meat and poultry to the United States.

Residue Testing at U.S. Entry

As a further residue check, FSIS randomly samples products at the port of entry and analyzes them for drug and chemical residues.

The FSIS annual import residue plan sets the initial sampling rate for each country based on the volume of product imported from the country. The plan includes the same compounds as the domestic residue monitoring program. Compounds are

selected based on their likelihood of contaminating the food supply and their potential harm to the consuming public. The list can include chemical compounds not legal in the United States if they have the potential to contaminate a foreign country's meat and poultry supply.

If imported products contain residues above the U.S. tolerance or action level, they are considered adulterated and cannot enter the United States. The occurrence of a residue violation at the port of entry raises concerns about the importing country's ability to control residues. So, sampling is automatically increased for related products from the entire country, as well as on subsequent shipments from the plant where the violative sample originated.

From time to time, FSIS will increase sampling for a specific country or for a specific compound. This can occur when there is an indication that a problem may exist or when a pattern develops of failed port-of-entry reinspections.

Port-of-entry testing indicates if exporting countries are meeting our residue control standards. For example, in a recent year, more than 13,500 samples of imported meat and poultry products were tested for residues. Only 16 samples contained illegal levels of drugs or chemical residues.

Species Verification

The farm bill amendments also require foreign countries to impose controls equivalent to those of FSIS to prevent species substitution. A product labeled "beef," for example, must be beef and cannot contain a less expensive or more readily available species. Countries must have effective testing programs for species verification and adequate security measures to prevent species substitution.

In addition, the AIIS selects shipments for species testing at port-of-entry reinspection. Import inspectors use quick and inexpensive species verification tests, which were developed by FSIS scientists.

